

## Turkey and the EU: The EU's Perspective

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Turkey and the EU share a decades-old common history of contractual-based relations since the late 1950 which finally led to the start of accession negotiations at the beginning of October 2005.<sup>1</sup> For a better understanding of this history and the actual situation of Turkey's accession process a short remark on the special character of this relationship is appropriate.

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### Turkey as the "other"

From its very beginning, EU-Turkey relations have not been perceived as an integral part of the European integration process by most EU member states. Turkey has always been regarded as an "outsider" to Europe with whom special relations had to be established mainly for security (policy) reasons. Although this led to the inclusion of a "membership option clause" in the Association Treaty of 1964, European integration was overwhelmingly perceived by the EU public as not including Turkey.

More than four decades of Turkey's association with the EU did nothing to change this perspective. To the contrary, the feeling of mutual estrangement deepened. Turkey was and remained to be the "other" to a majority of Europeans and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> For many Turks, the EU, or Europe, still is a political entity or grouping that cannot be trusted. It is more than often perceived as the heir to the European imperial powers that tried to carve-up Turkey after the First World War with the infamous Treaty of Sèvres.<sup>3</sup>

Such attitudes on both sides are reflected in opinion polls about the issue of Turkey's eventual EU membership. There has been a constant high proportion – more than often an absolute majority – of the population in EU countries that expressed itself to be against Turkish accession.<sup>4</sup> In Turkey we realized an equal or even higher proportion of the population to be in favor of EU entry during the past five years or so.

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However, at the same time, there was also a constant relevant high proportion that expressed doubts in the EU's seriousness to ever let Turkey in. Actually we see a fundamental change in this picture as the majority of proponents of membership among the Turks has dwindled to below 50 percent with another rise in the number of those who express strong reservations against the EU's trustworthiness. This should not come as a surprise given the Union's behavior towards Turkey during the past year of accession negotiations.<sup>5</sup>

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It is against this attitudinal background that we have to analyze the actual situation of Turkey's process of accession to the EU.

### A divided European Union

The EU presents itself as deeply divided over the issue of Turkey's membership of the Union. However, there is full consent among member states that it would be in the EU's best interest if Turkey would develop into a stable “embedded democracy” with a functioning market economy that would provide stability and welfare to its people. What is contested among them is if EU accession is necessary in order to enable Turkey to reach that goal.

And there is also no difference of opinion among member states that Turkey has to comply fully by the EU's accession conditions as laid down in the so-called Copenhagen criteria of 1993<sup>6</sup>, as stipulated by the European Council's decision of December 1999<sup>7</sup>, and as stated in the Negotiation Framework of 2004.<sup>8</sup> This adds up to the firm conviction on the side of the EU that Turkey has to undergo fundamental political, economic and societal changes before she could become a member and that such a process of change would take time.

More recently, there is a strong tendency among EU members to explicitly add to these positions the prerequisite of the Union's “enlargement capacity”, i.e. the unconditional ability to take in new members without losing the momentum of integration or without negatively affecting the EU's ability to function effectively.<sup>9</sup> With this background of common basic positions we have, however, a picture of rather different national approaches to the issue of Turkish membership. There are those member states that truly want membership to materialize whereas others are strictly against such an eventuality. In between we find a group of member states that are not really committed to either possibility but favor Turkish accession for other purposes. And, finally, we do have some “special cases”.<sup>10</sup>

Fully in favor of membership is the United Kingdom, mainly for strategic political reasons plus some second thoughts about the impact of further enlargement on the EU's “finality”. The group of strong supporters also includes Spain, Portugal and Italy who believe that Turkish membership would contribute to a strengthening of a “Mediterranean grouping” in an EU that tends to tilt more towards a central-east European

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orientation. Ireland, Finland and Sweden also support Turkey’s aspirations, partly because of strategic-political considerations partly because of their opinion that the EU has to stick to its stated commitments in order to retain its international credibility.

Belgium, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary are somehow trailing this group because they believe that accession would be the best way to ensure a lasting “Europeanization” of Turkey and they are also of the opinion that the EU has to stick to its initial commitments.

However, in all of these states we find a certain public opposition against Turkish accession mainly in conservative circles who think that the country is too alien to be successfully integrated into Europe.

This concern is much more developed in the Czech Republic where it directly impacts on the government position if right-wing conservative parties are in government. Many of these circles prefer an alternative way of binding Turkey to Europe, the most prominent of which is the “privileged partnership” concept developed by German Christian Democrats.<sup>11</sup>

This is also the political preference of Austria and France which lead the group of explicit opponents to membership. In a somewhat more differentiated manner these member states are joined by the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Denmark. In all these countries the fear prevails that either the integration process would be lethally jeopardized by Turkish entry or that the EU/Europe would become too much “Muslim” in that case and would lose its civilizational direction.

The three Baltic republics and Poland are in favor of Turkish accession but their approach is mainly driven by their general openness for further EU enlargement and less by specific attitudes concerning Turkey. All four countries have a strong interest in having their immediate neighborhood included in the EU to shelter them against a feared strong Russian come-back in Eastern Europe. Therefore, especially membership of Ukraine is advocated in order to extend the European space of democratic stability further eastward. As a consequence it would be irrational to opt for the exclusion of long-standing associate country Turkey. However, as the Polish case shows, there are political right-wing parties that can combine a plea for the inclusion of Ukraine and an argument for the exclusion of Turkey.

Greece and (Greek) Cyprus are to be considered special cases. Both countries have some serious political conflicts with Turkey which in their opinion can better be solved to their advantage through Turkish EU accession. Therefore, both of them advocate eventual membership after Ankara has proven that it fully and substantially complies with entry conditions and proves itself to have become a truly European country. First and foremost, this has to imply a settlement of outstanding conflicts according to their preferences.

In the case of Greece, this has led to a turnaround in its approach towards the Aegean neighbor since 1999.<sup>12</sup> Since then, Athens follows a policy of rapprochement and good neighborly relations with Turkey without, however, giving-up on her posi-

tions with regard to the territorial and other political disputes with Ankara. This new policy includes a general favorably approach to Turkish accession aspirations combined with a constant pressure on Turkey to comply to EU accession conditions which, inter alia, include the necessity of a friendly resolution of conflicts with neighboring countries.

(Greek) Cyprus that has only become a member state at the beginning of May 2004 seeks to exploit its new status for the imposition of a Greek Cypriot-inspired resolution of the Cyprus conflict on Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots via accession negotiations. Turkey's categorical refusal to recognize the (Greek) Republic of Cyprus as a legitimate representative of the island tends to encourage President Papadopoulos' aspirations in that respect.<sup>13</sup> In a certain sense, Germany, too, has become a special case. After having been the strongest promoter and original initiator of Turkey's accession process among the EU member states during the era of the Red-Green coalition government<sup>14</sup> it now has changed to a "bicephal" position with regard to Turkish membership. This is a consequence of the election outcome in 2005 which necessitated the formation of a grand coalition government of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Both parties follow opposite policies with regard to Turkey's accession: Christian Democrats advocate a "privileged partnership" instead of membership whereas the Social Democrats stick to their established line.

This leads to factual political immobilization of Germany with regard to the accession issue. The government adheres to the ongoing negotiation process according to the principle of *pacta sunt servanda* but refrains from any active moves in that process. Instead it points to the open-ended character of the negotiations with one part of the coalition hoping that they may falter somehow and the other part hoping for a positive outcome after Turkey has undergone considerable political and societal changes in the direction of a European style "Western democracy".

This intra-coalition constellation does not forebode well for the actual German EU presidency and its handling of the "Turkey dossier" after the decision of the European Council of December 2006 to suspend eight chapters of Turkey's accession negotiations until Ankara fully implements the Additional Protocol to the Customs Union Agreement, i.e. opens its ports and airports to traffic from the Republic of Cyprus. The German approach will most likely be reduced to correct presidential business without much initiative to give direction to the process or to forcefully engage itself into active problem solving. If unanimity for opening further chapters to negotiation can be reached among EU member states, the German presidency dutifully will execute such decisions. In the same way, it will organize the process of intra-EU negotiations about the passing of the pending EU regulation concerning direct trade with the Turkish Cypriot Republic. However, it seems unlikely that the German government would undertake special efforts in overcoming deadlocks among member states in

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order to get the accession process moving faster. In the same way it will refrain from putting any obstacles to an agreement among member states.

### Arguments “pro” and “con”

The respective positions of the various member states are backed by a bundle of arguments concerning eventual political and economic problems and/or consequences of Turkish membership. All these arguments have been established over the past two to four years and have been reiterated time and again by either proponents or opponents of accession negotiations<sup>15</sup> although none of them have been really new ones.<sup>16</sup>

#### The “pro” camp

The pro-camp concentrates mainly on the strategic advantages that Turkish membership would have for the EU. They point to the enormous geo-strategic importance of Turkey for the realization of the Union’s fundamental political interest in creating a secure and prospering neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> In their analysis the accession process would lead to a politically stable, democratic and economically advancing Turkey that could fulfill two important functions: first, it would serve as an example for the broader Middle East region that Western-style democracy and economic prosperity is possible in a country with an overwhelming Muslim population and second, this would enable Turkey, as part of the EU’s foreign and security policy framework, to play an anchor-role in its politically volatile neighborhood.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to that, Turkey could enhance the EU’s energy security by developing itself, with EU assistance, to a regional energy hub that would be crucial for Europe’s supply with natural gas and oil. At the same time, such a role would considerably enhance the Union’s access to the Caspian region and to Central Asia.<sup>19</sup>

And finally, Turkish membership could signal to the Islamic world that the EU is not bound to be a “Christian club” but that its values are open to all that want to apply them, also to large, secular predominantly Muslim democracies. This could boost the chances of political and economic “modernizers” in other Muslim societies who closely follow the fate of Turkey’s EU aspirations.

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But the EU, too, could directly profit as the inclusion of approximately 80 million Turkish Muslims as democratic EU citizens would provide a potential for the development of a genuine “Euro-Islam” that could help to overcome the potential of Islamist radicalization in some member states. Such hopes are based on the widely-accepted non-radical character of Turkish Islam in contrast to more radical versions that prevail in some Arab countries and in other parts of the Islamic world which also tend to proliferate into the European sphere.

All such consequences of Turkey's accession would greatly enhance the EU's potential as a global actor in the world-wide competition about the right way to shape a stable and peaceful global order in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Other arguments in favor of Turkish membership of the EU emphasize the great economic potential that the country has as one of the more important emerging market economies to contribute to the EU's economic growth. Or they argue that the young Turkish population could help overcome some of the problems that will result from the general demographic decline of almost all EU member states.

At present, one has to acknowledge that these arguments have hardly left the circles of foreign and security policy experts and like-minded politicians and media people. They have not at all reached the broader public of EU member states. Here, fears, concerns, and resentment dominate the thinking about Turkish accession to the Union.

#### The "contra" camp

The fears are based on a number of arguments which can broadly be divided in political-ideological ones and in economic-social ones.<sup>20</sup> All of them are derived from the conviction that Turkey is too large, too poor and too Muslim in order to fit into the EU scheme. They have gained in prominence and public impact by the growing so-called enlargement fatigue as a consequence of the failure of the French and Dutch referendums about the Constitutional Treaty which has led to a general skepticism concerning any further enlargement among a large part of the European public and political elite alike.

The most simple but, nevertheless, weighty argument is that Turkey geographically does not belong to Europe and thus is not a European country being eligible for EU membership. Added to this, one can often find the argument that Turkey due to its political and cultural-ideological history is not part of the history of European civilization which also prevents the possibility of an eventual membership. Turkey as the "other" cannot become an EU member.<sup>21</sup>

This perception of Turkey's "otherness" is also behind the prominent argument that Turkish membership would dilute the EU past recognition as has been expressed by Girard d'Estaing's famous statement that this would mean "the end of the EU as a political union."<sup>22</sup> More concretely, it is feared that Turkey's "different political culture" would lead to constant problems in EU decision-making and in the implementation of EU decisions among an overwhelming Muslim population. Related to this argument is another more political one: There is a concern that Turkish national interests will dominate the EU's agenda as the country would be the largest member state at the time of accession with respective great influence in institutions and decision-making procedures.

Others argue that acceptance of Turkey in the ranks of EU members would open the door for other non-European countries to follow. Countries especially mentioned in this context are Morocco and Israel. The general fear is that Turkish accession could lead to an unlimited enlargement which would definitely overload the EU's capacity for policy-making and would, finally, reduce the EU to a free-trade area or customs union writ large.

Finally there is another political argument to be heard against conducting accession negotiations that Turkey still does by no means fulfill the political criteria for the opening of such negotiations as they have been stipulated by the European Council of Copenhagen in 1993. Proponents of this argument point to the constant criticism of the European Commission and the European Parliament concerning Turkey's human rights record, its treatment of minorities and the political role of the military. In this respect, the issue of the "Armenian genocide" and the treatment of the "Kurdish minority" are often cited as special cases in point.

Another bundle of arguments put forward against Turkish accession concern possible social and economic consequences.<sup>23</sup> There is a general fear that the EU would experience another wave of labor migration from Turkey induced by considerable differences in the level of development which could negatively impact on the social fabric of member states, especially Germany. In addition, due to Turkey's low level of development in relation to the EU's average, huge money transfers are foreseen in terms of EU structural funds and agricultural support mechanism which could cause a total breakdown of the Union's financial system. In short, social and economic costs of an eventual Turkish membership are seen as unbearable for the EU.

These concerns have also seriously impacted on the Negotiation Framework that has been presented by the European Commission in late 2004 and has been accordingly adopted by the European Council in its decision of December 2004 to open accession negotiations with Ankara in October 2005.<sup>24</sup> Never before the EU has adopted such an elaborate and caution-minded framework. This, too, underlines the uniqueness of Turkey's accession process and contradicts constant assurances of EU institutions that the country will be treated according to the same principles that have been applied to other candidate states. Even if this is so, these principles are applied in a specific way to the specific case of Turkey.

In addition to the afore-mentioned arguments, there exist also doubts about the strategic and security value of a Turkish membership.<sup>25</sup> It is argued that, due to its established foreign and security policy culture, Turkey would try to instrumentalize the CFSP/ESDP components of the EU for the realization of its own national security interests in the Wider Middle East region instead of integrating itself as a co-operative member into the structures and policies of the Union. This would turn the EU into a front-line actor with regard to the most volatile and insecure region of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world with direct borders to the Caucasus, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In short, Turkish membership would become a security policy liability for the EU instead of a security policy asset.

## Conclusion

Limited space forbids commenting on the various arguments which are presented as representative elements of the divisive EU's perspective on the issue of Turkish membership. Some very general remarks, however, shall be made in order to put these arguments in a broader perspective. First, all of these pro and contra arguments can be seriously disputed.<sup>26</sup> Second, it is not possible to reach definite, "true" scholarly results by analyzing

the various issues mentioned although it will definitely help to inform political debates about these issues.

The main reason for this seemingly humble argument is the fact that neither social sciences nor economics provide theories and methods that allow precise forecasts over a period of ten to fifteen years. Third, the decision for or against going for Turkish membership of the EU is a fundamentally political one and has to be justified that way.

This implies that in the EU's democracies politicians need the consent of the governed in order to be able to follow a certain political line in this question.

Consequently, fourth, Turkish membership will not occur without public consent. And this implies, fifth that there is still a long way to go for both sides, the EU and Turkey if membership should take place one time. The crucial question here is, if the EU and Turkey, their public and political elites, will have the stamina and patience that are necessary to go through such a long and arduous political process.

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#### Endnotes:

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